

# Mary in the Middle

The use and function of a female character in the policing of a male-male relationship in BBC's *Sherlock*

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## Abstract

The addition of Mary Morstan to Series 3 of the BBC's *Sherlock* is analysed through the application of Eve Sedgwick's theory of homosociality as well as performativity theory to shed light on how a female character can be used not to only police a male-male relationship, but also create a safe space for them to express sentiment. The analysis of Mary's role in BBC's *Sherlock* suggests that she is mainly used to ensure that the performance of sexuality in BBC *Sherlock* was mainly heterosexual, although the performative level of the program leans towards a homosexual reading in regards to John and Sherlock. The main thesis of this article is that female characters are used to police male-male relationships, ensuring that heterosexuality is the true sexuality of the main characters; though homosocial and homosexual tendencies might be expressed.

**Keywords** BBC *Sherlock*, subtext, queer theory, homosocial, performativity

## Introduction

Applying Eve Sedgwick's theory of homosociality and Bollobás' expansion of Butler's theory of performativity to Series 3 of *Sherlock* (2010), this analysis examines the nature of the queer subtext – characterized by heterosexual coupling – in the BBC's latest adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle's novels. As Eric Savoy has explained, Sedgwick's sees queer performativity as "resistantly unaccountable, as a 'torsion of mutual perversion', of what the text imagines as reference and what it invokes beyond its structures" (Savoy 1999, 153). There has been a proliferation of definitions of performativity; the definition that this article will deal with is closely related to that of subtext. There is a danger in relating the *performance* of *Sherlock* (2010) to the heteronormative intentions of the narrative and the *performativity* to the apparent homosexual undertones. Yet, using this approach helps accomplish two goals: it serves to help detect the homosexual subtext's visibility in *Sherlock* (2010), whilst also keeping in mind that this performative level of sexuality may not be intentional.

As it shall be explained, the apparent heterosexual basis for John and his love interest Mary is used as a cover that John and Sherlock can hide behind to ensure that their relationship with each other cannot be perceived as being of a homosocial nature. However, this paper argues that by using Mary as a cover the nature of John and Sherlock's friendship becomes more difficult to label. This analysis exhibits the tensions that can be created by having a double reading in a television show; by never refuting nor agreeing with the performativity of Sherlock and John's relationship, the text is placed in a grey zone where the best label for their relationship would be homosocial. However, Mary's presence, which in theory should dispute any notions of homosexuality between John and Sherlock, ultimately places the homosocial explanation on shaky ground. The analysis starts by focusing on how Mary is introduced to the audience in *The Empty Hearse* (2014) and then moves on to take a closer look at how she intermediates between John and Sherlock. The paper will then turn to look at the peculiarity of *The Sign of Three* (2014) taking place in a wedding setting, which somewhat surprisingly manages to have Mary not acknowledge the part she is playing in the proceedings. Finally, the labelling of Mary as John's "pressure point" will be examined to determine if it is indeed a way of policing the apparent love triangle.

### Is There Something About Mary?

The last minutes of *The Reichenbach Fall* (2012) featured a grief-stricken John Watson staring at Sherlock's supposed grave, so it is only fitting that the first scene featuring John in *The Empty Hearse* (Lovering 2014) is him standing in front of the same grave. However, two important things have changed since the audience last saw John, the first being that two years have passed since *The Reichenbach Fall*, the second that John is not alone. John is standing alone in front of the gravestone in the first few seconds of the scene, looking every bit the part of a still grief ridden man, and this impression of him would have stayed with the audience were it not for the fact that he is joined by a woman – later introduced as Mary – in the last seconds of the scene (Lovering, 0:5:00-0:5:18). Having Mary appear at the last second might very well point to her serving as what Sedgwick terms a 'conduit': she provides John with a safe space to express his feelings towards Sherlock without the 'fear' of being perceived as being homosexual (Sedgwick 1985, 26). Indeed, Mary's presence, be that in spirit or in body, may work as a way of pushing the apparent homosexual tension between John and Sherlock into the subtext.

As Enikő Bollobás argues in her *They aren't until I call them: Performing the Subject in American Literature* (2012), subtext is connected to "performativity": "homosexuality is performatively brought about in the subtext, whilst the heterosexual performance happens in the text", argues Bollobás (2012, 156). Subtext is *performativity*, whilst the text is the "main" performance. Having a coded subtext, which performatively implies a homosexually orientated reading, and a text whose performance denies any other reading than a heteronormative one, thereby creates a double narrative (Bollobás 2012, 156).

*The Empty Hearse* highlights this tension by having the performance and the performativity differ from each other. The addition of a moustache to John's appearance seems to be an on-going joke in the first part of the episode as everyone from Mrs. Hudson to Sherlock and Mary proclaim their distaste for it; their utterances result in him shaving it off. John could be shaving it off because everyone seems to hate it, but, interestingly enough, Mary believes there to be a more particular reason: Sherlock (Lovering 0:30:52-0:30:54). Indeed, she carries on, somewhat mocking John, by declaring "[she]

had six months of bristly kisses and then His Nibs turns up" (Loving 0:31:10). The use of the nickname "his nibs" could either refer to how Sherlock holds himself in high regard or it could refer to a person in authority – or it could very well be a mix of the two; especially taking into consideration John's opinion of Sherlock at that point in time. The scene as a whole could be seen as an indication of John caring more about Sherlock's opinion than that of his girlfriend.

Nevertheless, John manages to turn the focus away from Sherlock's hold over him, by cheekily stating to Mary that he will marry her. By turning focus back on Mary, he manages to steer the conversation away from the idea of Sherlock being more important than Mary, which was indicated in the performativity of the scene. Consequently, the significance of Mary's presence appears to be lessened in the reappearance of Sherlock, making her role in this love triangle follow the structure proposed by Sedgwick (1985: 26).<sup>1</sup>

Sedgwick argues that the bond between the two men in a love triangle is stronger, because she believes the bond between the rivals to be the strongest in that triangle; yet that is not the case in *Sherlock*. Thus, agreeing with Sedgwick's theory of the bond between the two men being the strongest presents a slight problem in regards to applying that structure to John and Sherlock: they are not rivals, but are indeed the lover and the beloved. In fact, the roles of the rivals fall to Mary and Sherlock, who seemingly do not have a stronger relationship than the one found between John and Sherlock. However, that is not to say that the theory of a female character being introduced to a homosocial relationship does not police and facilitate the heterosexual undertones, which further analysis will highlight. Sherlock and John might be outliers when it comes to Sedgwick's theory on love triangles, but when it comes to the use of Mary as a conduit for their homosocial relationship, they seem to follow the description word for word.

Male-male friendships seem to be muddled with homophobia, a consequence, perhaps, of the heteronormative patriarchal structure that historically permeates the Western world. Sedgwick agreed that homosocial friendships, particularly between men, are characterised by intense homophobia and genuine hatred of homosexuality (1985: 3). This need for a male kinship to be heterosexual is perhaps the reason Sherlock and John continuously use Mary as a proof of their heterosexuality. *The Sign of Three* (2014 McCarthy) is set at a

wedding reception, but instead of relying heavily on the wedding itself, the main plot is placed on the best man's speech, a job which falls to Sherlock. However, one flashback shows the audience that it was not easy for John to ask Sherlock for this. Indeed Sherlock's confusion forced John to state that he wanted to stand "up [at the altar] with the two people that [he] loves and cares about most in the world. Mary Morstan and you" (McCarthy 0:21:48-0:23:29).

John's usage of Mary can either follow the trend proposed by Sedgwick, or create a double reading of how John perceives his relationship with Sherlock. By grouping Sherlock and Mary together, the statement of John caring about them most in the world is not seen as homosexual, as his fiancée is mentioned in the same sentence. Mary's presence in the sentence creates a heterosexual safe space for John to express sentiment, without it being perceived as being more than homosocial. However, Mary's place in the sentence also equals her to Sherlock, which creates an ambiguous reading of the scene. Following Bollabas' definition of the performativity of sexuality, it could be said that by equating Sherlock to Mary, the performativity of the utterance is homosexual, whilst the performance is strictly heterosexual.

Furthermore, Sherlock similarly uses the structure of adding Mary to a declaration of sentiment. During his best man's speech he states that John is "[sitting] between the woman you have made your wife and the man you have saved. In short, the two people, who love you the most in all this world" (McCarthy 0:26:20-0:26:28). Sherlock mirrors John, but where he stops, Sherlock goes on to say "and I know I speak for Mary as well, when I say, we will never let you down and we have a lifetime ahead to prove that" (0:26:28- 0:26:36). The addition of Mary in this sentence prevents it from sounding like a groom's speech, instead of the best man's speech. It seems that the love Mary has for John, which intriguingly is not voiced by her during the episode, is placed on the same level as the love Sherlock holds for John.

"We'll have a lifetime to prove that" seems somewhat reminiscent of the marital promise of "till death do us part" and consequently, the performativity of homosexuality could be said to move from the subtext into the text itself. However, by including Mary in the sentence, the text resists a homosexual reading; the theme remains confined to the subtext, despite what gets said. There is a tendency for

the acknowledgment of male intimacy to be policed by the inclusion of heterosexual love interests (Thomas 2012, 41). If Mary had not been included in this promise made by Sherlock, the performance of the text could have shifted drastically, as it could have been perceived as him plainly stating his (romantic) love for John. Indeed, it would be difficult to deny any type of homosexual undertones in Sherlock's promise *without* the addition of Mary.

### The Performance of Pressure Points

Pressure points are quite telling. They are the weak spots that can be used to expose any person, and in regards to subtext and thus also performativity and homosociality, they are quite interesting. John's pressure point is his wife, which Magnussen, the villain from *His Last Vow* (Hurran 2014), has no problem figuring out (0:24:06). Sherlock's pressure point seems more difficult to pinpoint for Magnussen, yet he manages in the end to tell Sherlock (as well as John): "[it is] very hard to find a pressure point on you Mr Holmes [...] But look how you care about John Watson. Your damsel in distress" (Hurran 1:11:47-1:12:05). The choice of the words "damsel in distress" is interesting, as it is a trope most often found in connection with women, and one that is often interconnected with the prospect of love and marriage. However, whilst "damsel in distress" has the performativity of homosexuality, it is also important to keep in mind that it could merely foreshadow Sherlock saving John minutes later in the episode. Furthermore, "damsel in distress" seems to be used more as a taunt towards John, as it suggests that he needs saving, and that he is passive in his friendship with Sherlock. It seems as if the hints of a homosexual coupling are then performative, and perhaps not as intentional as could be believed. Indeed, it seems that the main performance of sexuality in *Sherlock*, particularly John's heterosexuality, makes it difficult to determine if John and Sherlock are engaged in more than a homosocial relationship.

However, whilst the pressure points alone are interesting, as they show how John and particularly Sherlock feel about each other, they also show that weak spots can be used as an advantage. During *His Last Vow*, Sherlock is shot, and, as he flat lines at the hospital, the audience is shown fragments of his internal "mind palace". In a padded cell, Sherlock meets his nemesis, Moriarty, who taunts him during what seems to be his final moments. However, as Moriarty



keeps on listing people who will mourn him, something seems to happen as he reaches John: “John will cry buckets and buckets. It’s him that I worry about the most. That wife... You’re letting him down, Sherlock. John Watson is definitely in danger” (Hurrar 0:39:57-0:40:20). The moment Moriarty mentions that John is in danger, Sherlock opens his eyes and starts to fight his way back to the land of the living. Even Moriarty, who in this scene is a figment of Sherlock’s imagination, comments by saying “Was it something I said?” (0:40:36). The fact that Sherlock comes back from the dead for John mirrors Sherlock’s utterance “John Watson, you keep me right” (McCarthy, 1:09:22) in *The Sign of Three* (2014). Is Sherlock’s display of high regard towards John then performativity – or is he performing it? It is difficult to decide whether or not Sherlock’s level of affection towards John is performativity; perhaps a more fitting question would be if Sherlock’s level of care is that of a friend or of a potential lover? A question such as this one is difficult to answer, as there is no true indication in series 3 of *Sherlock*. However, a possible explanation could be that Sherlock does not want to scare John away.

There is a strong indication of John not having realised the full extent of what Sherlock would do for him. John seems unsure about whom Sherlock would bother protecting and is quite passive, as he is being used as more of a spectator of the proceedings than an active participant (Huran 0:46:32). If there is a romantic relationship going on between Sherlock and John, it seems quite unrequited on John’s part; particularly because his pressure point is his wife, whilst Sherlock’s is John. Yet, Sherlock uses John’s pressure point, Mary, ultimately to save him; once again showing that pressure points can be exploited to save people. As Magnussen is flicking John’s face, Sherlock realises that the only way John will be left alone is by killing Magnussen. After making the kill shot, Sherlock speaks three lines that go back to using Mary as a cover: “Get away from me John. Give my love to Mary. Tell her she’s safe now” (1:21:50-1:22:08). To John, it might seem as if Sherlock kills Magnussen, in front of MI6 and his brother, to save Mary. Yet, to the audience it seems obvious that Sherlock exploits John’s pressure point to save him. By choosing to give his love to Mary, and to say that *she* is safe now, Mary is used as a cover. However, in this instance it appears that the cover is being used for John’s sake rather than for the

audience's. Had Sherlock given his love to John and told him that *he* was safe now, the blurred line between homosociality and the heavily featured queer subtext would have been crossed. By using Mary, and thus reminding John and the audience of his heterosexuality, balance is restored, making John feel secure in his heterosexuality. At the same time, it ensures that the main performance of the show is still heterosexual rather than a more queer or homosexually oriented one.

That said, the last minutes of *His Last Vow* play one last game with the subtext. As Sherlock is saying goodbye to John before what the audience knows is his impending death, he delivers a revelation: "John there's something ... I should say, I've meant to say always and I never have. Since it's unlikely we'll ever meet again. I might as well say it now... Sherlock is actually a girl's name" (Hurran 1:25:46-1:26:02). This declaration is strange, because it seems through most of it that Sherlock, in his last moments with John, is trying to declare his love for him. However, he ends with a joke about his name, and perhaps that is the essence of this episode. Sherlock's pressure point is John, but because John is *not* gay and is married, Sherlock seems forced to follow the rules of subtext and to laugh off any indication that the two of them could ever be more than best friends. Perhaps Sherlock merely has trouble following the rules of social behaviour and emotions as he is a self-proclaimed sociopath and thus tries to diffuse a tense situation with a joke. It is difficult to tell. Either way it seems that Mary functions as a safe space for John, in particular, to express feelings, without being perceived as being gay. Sherlock seems to use Mary as a way to not frighten John with the idea of them having more than a homosocial relationship. However, it is important to note that it is difficult to define the nature of John and Sherlock's relationship, as the evidence is constituted by homosexually-oriented subtext or performativity, which is perhaps not enough for definitive conclusions.

## Conclusion

Mary personifies why homosociality is a difficult matter to deal with, as it is neither confined to the performance nor the performative level. Indeed when it comes to love between friends, there seems to be a difficulty in differentiating it from either being intimate or platonic. C. S. Lewis states, in his book *The Four Loves*, that



characters' sexuality can neither be proved nor refuted as the lack of evidence is customarily treated as evidence: "the absence of smoke simply proves that the fire is carefully hidden" (26). Perhaps, that is an important point to keep in mind; when looking at subtext, performativity, and homosocial relationships, they can never really be proved nor can they be refuted, simply because the evidence of them is either vague, circumstantial, or absent.

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## Notes

- 1 In her theory on the love triangle, Sedgwick build upon René Girard's *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1976), where he argues that when a plot involves a literary love triangle, a mediator is situated between a subject's desire for an object. Girard's main argument is that the impulse toward the object is ultimately an impulse toward the mediator.